

14 QUOTATIONS



Robert Penn Warren

(1905-1989)

Robert Penn Warren of Kentucky is the only American honored by Pulitzer Prizes in both poetry and fiction—twice for poetry. Yet in the long run he never became a major writer and he spent his career in the towering shadow cast by his fellow southerners, most prominently William Faulkner, Flannery O'Connor, Eudora Welty, and Katherine Anne Porter—all of them in the Modernist tradition. Compared to them Warren is a conventional Realist and merely very good. But he is easier to understand and many common readers would likely prefer his writing to theirs. Warren was a Rhodes Scholar at Oxford and an academic all his life, a founder and Editor of *Southern Review* and advisory editor of *Kenyon Review*. He is best known for his twice-filmed historical novel about the rise and fall of the politician Huey Long in Louisiana *All the King's Men* (1946) and for demonstrating and promoting objective New Criticism in his influential and very widely used *Understanding Poetry: An Anthology for College Students* (1938) and *Understanding Fiction* (1959) co-edited with his colleague at Yale, Cleanth Brooks. Today, however--despite his book depicting John Brown as a martyr, his moving poem "Pondy Woods" (1929) about the lynching of a black man, and his book of interviews with black leaders *Who Speaks for the Negro?* (1956)--Postmodern academics in general consider him too white, male, southern, agrarian, conservative, traditional, moralistic, patriotic, and scholarly to be Politically Correct.

ORDER OF TOPICS: nashville fugitives, segregation, race, liberals, political correctness, writing, poetry, poets, experimental writing, criticism:

NASHVILLE FUGITIVES

I think there is a great fallacy in assuming that there was a systematic program behind the Fugitive Group [Allen Tate, John Crowe Ransom, Donald Davidson, Merrill Moore, Andrew Lytle]. There was no such thing, and among the members there were deep differences in temperament and aesthetic theory. They were held together by geography and poetry. They all lived in Nashville...

SEGREGATION

My essay in *I'll Take My Stand* was about the Negro in the South, and it was a defense of segregation. [He later became an active supporter of racial intergration.]

RACE

Race isn't an isolated thing—I mean as it exists in the U.S.—it becomes a total symbolism for every kind of issue.

LIBERALS

The tragedy of a big half of American liberalism is to try to legislate virtue. You can't legislate virtue. You should simply try to establish conditions favorable for the growth of virtue. But that will never satisfy the bully-boys of virtue; the plug-uglies of virtue.

POLITICAL CORRECTNESS

There are mighty few stories you can tell without offending somebody—without some implicit affront.

WRITING

The urge to write poetry is like having an itch. When the itch becomes annoying enough, you scratch it.

I try to immerse myself in the motive and *feel* toward meanings, rather than plan a structure or plan effects.

POETRY

For what is a poem but a hazardous attempt at self-understanding: it is the deepest part of autobiography.

The poem is not a thing we see—it is, rather, a light by which we may see—and what we see is life.

POETS

Poets, we know, are terribly sensitive people, and in my observation one of the things they are most sensitive about is money.

EXPERIMENTAL WRITING

What is “experimental writing”? James Joyce didn't do “experimental writing”—he wrote *Ulysses*. Eliot didn't do “experimental writing”—he wrote “The Waste Land.” When you fail at something you call it an “experiment,” an elite word for flop. Just because the lines are uneven or capitals missing doesn't mean experiment.

CRITICISM

A lot of modern criticism has run off into lingo, into academicism.

One thing that a lot of so-called New Critics had in common was a willingness to look long and hard at the literary object. But the ways of looking might be very different. Eliot is a lot closer to Arnold and the Archbishop of Canterbury than he is to Yvor Winters, and Winters is a lot closer to Irving Babbitt than to Richards, and the exegeses of Brooks are a lot closer to Coleridge than to Ransom, and so on.

There is no correct or complete criticism.

Some of these quotations are excerpted from
Writers at Work: The Paris Review Interviews, ed. Malcolm Cowley
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